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STANFIELD HALL.

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Author of "Minnigrey," "Woman and Her Master," &c.



Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.
AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

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[HERBERT DE LOZENGIA POINTING TO THE HEAD OF HERMAN.]

"Nothing, sir knight," he stammered, confusedly; mere idle thoughts—no more."

"Such thoughts are dangerous here. Keep them to thyself, Sir Franklin, and it shall go well with thee."

The arrival of the procession cut short all further reply.

First came a noble, bareheaded, bearing the banner of the clergy, followed by the monks, two and two, chanting the Litany of the Saints: after them marched the dignitaries of the cathedral, followed by the bishop clothed in the pomp of purple, but in black cope and stole, in sign of penitence. On the appearance of the prelate a suppressed murmur arose among the people—on any other occasion they would have shouted—for they loved him for his charities, had mourned him dead, and rejoiced to find him living. The prisoner followed in complete armour, surrounded by his guards.

The bishop and the clergy were no sooner seated, than the criminal walked deliberately up to the stake, to which the executioners immediately attached him, while the civil judges pronounced his sentence. "How dost thou die?" demanded the marshal of the city, whose duty it was to record the answers of the prisoner.

"A penitent," replied a deep voice, which issued from the helmet of the victim, like an echo from the grave; "a Catholic and a Christian."

A shriek of mortal agony was heard at a distance in the crowd; and a monk, whom all took for Father Oswald, was seen trying to force his way through the dense mass of people.

"Apply the flames," firmly exclaimed the prisoner, upon whose ears the scream had fallen. "At once perform your office—my soul to God, my ashes to the winds."

The fire was applied, and in an instant the flames blazed with fury; for Herbert de Lozenga had humanely ordered the wood which composed the pile to be saturated with spirits and resinous gums. Again the monks raised the *Requiem* which implored mercy for the departing sinner's soul. But a voice was heard, louder than all their music, crying "Forbear!" and the form of a frantic monk was seen, with superhuman strength, fending the yielding crowd, which gave way like a cleft stream before him. With a last effort he broke through the inner circle, sprang into the blazing pile, and endeavoured to release the victim from the stake; his cowl fell back, as he did so, and all recognised Ernulf, the squire, at whose execution they imagined themselves assisting.

"Save them!" exclaimed the bishop, starting from his seat, as a fearful suspicion crossed his mind—a suspicion, alas, but too true; for at the same moment, the straps which fastened the helmet of the supposed criminal gave way, and fell into the flames, exposing to the horror-stricken gaze of all the well-known features of Father Oswald, who, to save his son, had thus contrived to take his place.

The very precautions taken to shorten the sufferings of the criminal rendered it impossible to save him; but he did not die alone; for his repentant son shared his death, and mingled his ashes with his. Sadly and silently the crowd dispersed, like men stricken with a mental palsy; the scene they had witnessed having displayed another page in that mysterious book, the human heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN the plain extending from the moat which surrounded the hill upon which Norwich Castle stands the lists were erected. The simplicity of the preparations showed that they were intended for no courtly tournament, but for an encounter where life and death were set upon the issue. Close to the exterior palisades a large lodge was built, adorned with purple hangings; over it floated the banners of Odo of Caen and his brother nobles, who were to act as judges of the fight. But the rest of the buildings were plain in the extreme. In the midst of the inclosed arena were a block and a post, on the former of which the accused, if defeated, was to suffer death; while to the latter his name was to be affixed by the hands of the executioner in the event of his non-appearance, a mark of infamy more degrading than even the pillory or modern outlawry.

The sun shone brightly on the scene; and, at an early hour, the troops of the confederated franklins marched to the spot, most of them wearing the long white frock peculiar to their nation, and which the carter's smock of the present day nearly resembles. Beneath it they could conveniently hide their arms, and appear to a casual observer a peaceful body of serfs and peasants, drawn together by curiosity to witness the approaching fight. Soon after the parties began to arrange themselves, the leaders of the enterprise observed, with secret dissatisfaction, that immediately a party of Saxons arrived, and took up their position on the ground, an equal number of Normans, all of whom were well armed, placed themselves beside them, and, without seeming to do so intentionally, so intersected them that all possibility of the conspirators acting in concert was destroyed. Several times they manœuvred to change positions, but were as often outmanœuvred by the Normans, who, whether by accident or design, thwarted by their evolutions every attempt which the Saxons made to unite themselves in one or more compact bodies.

The only party which presented anything at all like an appearance of having unity were the followers of Edda, a numerous body of men, well armed, and commanded by a youthful knight, whose face

was hid by his visor, but whose firm step and active movements showed him to be in the full pride of strength and manhood.

The Norman nobles were the last who made their appearance upon the ground ; most of them, as they did so, resigned the command of their vassals to their esquires, and proceeded to the castle, where a council had been summoned by the bishop, to be held previous to the proceedings in the lists. One by one the Saxon franklins were sent for on different pretexts ; so that, by the time Herbert de Lozenga arrived, escorted by a large body of his followers, under the conduct of George of Erpingham, most of the leaders, whether Norman or Saxon, were assembled in the great hall.

Edda, the most powerful chief of the conquered race, walked by the side of the prelate, who divided his conversation with him and the red-haired stranger, whose real rank was known only to himself. Many a knight and vavasour followed in his train, bound by the tenure of their lands to do him feudal homage. As a Norman baron, he ranked with the most powerful ; and in his double capacity of Bishop of Norwich and Abbot of Hulm, with the richest ecclesiastics in the kingdom ; added to which, his known favour with the Conqueror, and office of Chancellor, made him one of the most important personages in the realm, and his influence was courted and respected by all.

A tall, gaunt man appeared amongst the stragglers in the bishop's train, the mere sight of whom seemed to excite the indignation of the crowd ; even the men-at-arms, who escorted him, to protect him from the insults of the mob, kept at a respectful distance from him, and laughed whenever a gibe more bitter, or a curse more fierce, saluted his appearance. It was the city executioner. Whether indifference or philosophy rendered him insensible to the degradation of his position, it might have been difficult to decide ; but he walked on, amidst the jests, curses, and hootings of the people, with an impassibility of feature which a Stoic might have envied. He was clothed in red—the colour of his office—and wore a large black barret, which rendered the ghastly hue of his features more apparent ; in his hand he carried a leathern bag, sufficiently capacious to contain either the head of a victim or the implements of his fearful and disgusting office.

"Is Saint Peter taking tithe of heads to-day ?" whispered Brenner, one of the few Saxon leaders who remained upon the ground, "that he walks with such a collector in his train ? The headsman is a bird of evil omen ; ill befalls the purpose or the man whose path he crosses. Would I had met his sight on any day than this."

"Amen !" replied his companion. "The only consolation is, he is without his axe. Have you observed," he added, looking cautiously around to assure himself that no one could overhear him, "how the Normans flank our men ? I trow there is more of

purpose than of chance in it. I fear we are betrayed, or, at least, suspected."

Brenner had previously, in his own mind, made the same observation, but remained silent, not wishing to alarm his companion by acknowledging his suspicions. At this moment they were joined by a third party—Armand of the Wold, one of the petty franklins, compelled by his position to follow blindly in the wake of his more powerful chief; a shrewd, keen, calculating man, always ready to turn with the tide he was too weak to stem. The gloomy restlessness of his nature showed that he was ill at ease.

"Who has seen Herman of the Burg?" he demanded; "why is he absent at such a moment? For two days he has not appeared amongst us. I like not this."

The first two speakers confessed that they had neither seen nor could explain his absence—an avowal followed by immediate silence, each calculating how far his neighbour might be a partner in the treason, if any such existed. Brenner was the first to break it.

"Most of our party, on one pretext or another, have been summoned to the castle," whispered the first speaker. "There are invitations a prudent man always should decline."

"Especially an enemy's," observed Armand.

"And above all a Norman's. Ill befell the day when they first set foot on England's happy soil. But look," continued Brenner, "how the bishop lures the noble Edda to the council. I thought his white hairs covered more wisdom."

"Or less treason," muttered Armand.

At this moment the seneschal, wearing his chain and carrying his wand of office, approached the speakers, and commanded them to attend the council about to sit in the castle. The summons was given in the name of the bishop chancellor. As the officer was attended by a party of men-at-arms, resistance would have been equally foolish as useless. After a mutual glance, which seemed to say, "We are fairly caught," they bowed in acquiescence, and followed their conductor to the council.

The great hall of Norwich Castle was lined with men-at-arms, and a strong body guarded the different doors. All whose rank entitled them to the *entrée* were freely admitted; but once there, none but the Normans were allowed egress. Whenever a Saxon approached the entrance, he was respectfully informed that the council was about to commence, and invited to remain in his place—the tone of the invitation rendering it equivalent to a command. Thus suspicion and mistrust were at their height. The absence of Herman was the subject of many a comment; nor did the appearance of Odo of Caen and his brother nobles, in complete armour, tend to tranquillise the doubts of the conspirators, which at last became so painful that the clash of arms which announced the arrival of the bishop sounded as a relief to them; at least, they would learn the

worst, for the doubt of ill is sometimes more difficult to bear than even ill confirmed.

As if with an instinctive feeling of hostility, or of an approaching contest, the two parties had formed into separate groups, engaged in hurried whispered conversation, when Herbert de Lozenga, with his train, entered the hall. There was an expression of care upon his brow, although both step and air were firm as ever. Mirvan raised his visor as he advanced to meet him.

"Welcome, my lord and father," he exclaimed; "we attend your summons. Please you, we have business which the sword must judge, if the accused appears; if not, the executioner. Let us to the council, and at once."

The cold, though respectful, tone of the speaker showed that he looked upon the prelate as his enemy. Indeed, he doubted not but that it was by his secret contrivance Ulrick, whom he still continued to regard as his father's murderer, had been so singularly removed from prison.

"Patience, young man!" replied Herbert. "Is the thirst of blood so strong within thee, thou canst not wait an hour? Fear not but the accused will appear; my word shall be your gage that he will meet you."

The young earl bowed respectfully, and pointed to the chair at the end of the dais for the bishop to take his seat.

"Not so," he said, in answer to the mute invitation; "there is one amongst us to whom all claims must yield. "Prince," he added, turning to the stranger, "assume your seat, and let us to the affairs of moment which detain us."

The appearance of the Conqueror's favourite son produced a varied feeling in the minds of the assembly. By the Normans he was greeted with a shout of triumph; by the Saxons he was received in sullen silence. They felt that they were betrayed—that the last hope of shaking off the Conqueror's yoke was lost.

"Venerable prelate, and you, noble peers," said the prince, as soon as he was seated, "our first duty is to inquire into the cause of the death of our faithful friend, Hugh de Bigod, to avenge his memory, to track the murderer's steps, if living; if dead, to consign his name to infamy and execration. Who are the accusers?"

"I am," exclaimed Mirvan, eagerly advancing.

"And I," calmly repeated the bishop.

"But whom do you accuse?" demanded the prince, first addressing himself to Mirvan.

"The man whom I once called my dearest friend; the man I would have trusted with more than my life—with honour; the man whose soul I once held so pure—I almost blushed at my unworthiness to call him friend—Ulrick, of what race I know not, but proved by the word of a noble knight, now absent, to be of gentle blood—Ulrick, the ward of my lord bishop there," he added, pointing half-

scornfully to the prelate, "whose word e'en now, I pray you all remember, was given for his appearance in the lists to meet the charge against him."

"Fear not, sir earl," interrupted Edda, proudly, "but he will keep his word."

"And you, my lord, whom do you accuse?" demanded William, addressing Herbert de Lozenga, whose countenance had never varied during Mirvan's speech.

"Herman of the Burg," he calmly replied.

Several of the Saxons started, for they knew by whose hand the deceased earl had fallen; indeed, the murderer had avowed it to more than one or two; but on Mirvan the accusation fell like a thunder-clap. 'Tis true that from his rough, unamiable manner, he had never liked his kinsman, but he had ever looked upon him as a man of unblemished honour, and as such would have defended his reputation with his life. His indignation, therefore, at the accusation was as unbounded as his astonishment, in which latter sentiment the Norman nobles, great as was their dislike to Herman, shared.

"Prince," he exclaimed, "this is a mere mockery of justice; the accused retorts on his accuser. I dare not further trust myself to speak, lest I forget the reverence due to age, to sacred function, and this royal presence; but ask him, pray ask him, upon what grounds he dares accuse my absent kinsman."

"You hear," interrogatively observed the prince; "on what proofs do you accuse him?"

"On his own confession," solemnly answered the bishop, "witnessed by these noble peers."

"His own confession!" mechanically repeated the young earl, as if doubting the evidence of his senses.

"Thyself shalt be the judge," continued the prelate, drawing from his breast the parchment which had been found in the breastplate of the unhappy Ernulf, and which our readers will doubtless remember had been attested by the signatures and seals of Odo of Caen and the Norman nobles on the night of Herman's execution. The document, which detailed every circumstance, had been written by the murderer, and given to his esquire, to convey to the assembled franklins in the caves of Whitlingham, as a still further proof of his devotion to the cause of Saxon independence. Every word was in his own handwriting, which Mirvan was well acquainted with, and witnessed by his arms.

"What have I read?" exclaimed the astonished and horror-stricken youth, as he let fall the scroll. "If this be true, as I confess it is, I am indeed doubly unhappy. I have lost my father, and have wronged my friend."

"That word regains him," exclaimed Ulrick, who, on a signal given by Herbert de Lozenga, entered the hall, and advanced gracefully to his accuser. "Mirvan," he added, "my heart hath

never done thee wrong ; e'en in my dungeon I accused not thee ; e'en at the scaffold had not cursed thy name."

A tear dimmed the eyes of the two friends as they embraced. Let not the worldling sneer at the confession of their weakness. Such weakness is more beautiful than strength. Earth hath many a gem more prized, but none more pure than manly friendship's honest, priceless tear.

"But where," exclaimed Mirvan, "is the fiend who hath deceived me, whose hand is stained with my dead father's blood ? Prince and nobles," he added, turning towards the daïs, "I demand on Herman of the Burg the judgment of his peers. The felon hath confessed. The doom, the doom ! I claim the murderer's doom !"

"Herman," solemnly answered the bishop, at the same time taking the speaker by the hand, and leading him to the window, "can fear no human judgment more ; he hath already passed a tribunal more awful far than man's. Behold !" One of the men-at-arms threw open the window as the prelate spoke, and Mirvan beheld, with surprise, the executioner in the act of affixing the head of the assassin on the post in the centre of the lists. For a moment he gazed upon it with a feeling of fierce satisfaction, which gradually yielded to a nobler sentiment ; he felt that human justice was accomplished, and shudderingly withdrew from the hideous spectacle as the soldier closed the casement. The effect upon the assembled Saxons was to produce consternation and dismay. Ignorant of the real cause of the culprit's death, they felt convinced they were betrayed, and slowly began to disperse, too happy in being permitted to escape. The Normans suffered their departure unopposed—such were the instructions they had received ; but the leaders of the contemplated insurrection were not so fortunate ; they still remained virtually prisoners in the castle. Shortly afterwards, the countess, Matilda, and Isabel entered the hall ; and as the subject of Ulrick's birth was gone into, it is unnecessary to repeat the proofs by which his rank and claim to Stanfield and the vast inheritance of Edda were established ; even the Normans confessed themselves satisfied, and frankly admitted him as their peer amongst them. If the heart of the acknowledged youth beat high, it was when his eyes encountered the blushing cheek of Matilda ; if he felt the sentiment of pride, it was when he grasped the hand of his recovered friend, and felt that he could claim his friendship upon equal terms.

Herbert de Lozenga approached the seat of the young prince, and whispered to him—

"Your promise, prince ! your promise !"

William turned uneasily upon his chair, like a man who sought to escape from something distasteful to him, but in vain ; the calm, cold eye of the bishop followed his every glance ; he felt that there was no escape from his plighted word.

"Herald," he said, "perform your duty."

The officer advanced into the midst of the hall, and thrice proclaimed Ulrick Earl of Stanfield, and heir of the Saxon Edda ; calling upon all who felt disposed to dispute his claims to stand forth and speak, or remain for ever dumb ! No voice replied to him. At each pause in the ceremony the prince cast a scrutinising glance on the young earl, whom the decision stripped of a fair portion of his large inheritance ; but the heart of Mirvan was too generous to entertain any selfish feeling. William, therefore, had no choice left but to proceed.

The prelate and Edda led the newly-acknowledged noble to the prince's chair ; who, taking his hands between his own, received his oath of allegiance ; and solemnly confirmed, as regent of the kingdom, and his father's representative, the act of investiture ; the prelate, as he did so, pronouncing aloud "Amen !"

"And now, Saxons and Normans," exclaimed William, "a few words with each. To you," he said, turning to the discouraged franklins, "your plots are known ; your treasons all unveiled ; you are here within our judgment-hall, surrounded by our faithful barons and our loyal troops ; the block within the lists ; the headsman ready at our call. What ransom can ye offer for your lives ?"

There was a silence ; the Normans gazed sternly upon their rivals, who felt that they were powerless within their hands ; and each internally cursed bitterly the memory of him by whom they had been deluded to their ruin.

The prince enjoyed their confusion, for he was no generous enemy, and again demanded, in a tone of taunting mockery, which displayed the natural cruelty of his disposition, and augured ill for the future—

"What ransom, Saxons, for your lives ?"

"Thy princely word," exclaimed the bishop, anxious to end the scene.

"And your intercession, my good lord," continued William, recalled by the grave tone of the speaker's voice to the prudence of conciliating the conquered race, as a means to his own accession to the Throne. "Franklins," he added, "you are pardoned ; your forfeit lands and lives are spared upon the payment of such fines as we hereafter shall impose. But remember, 'tis the last time that Mercy speaks ; be wiser for the future, and tempt the lion's wrath no more, lest he should turn and rend ye."

"And for the future," said Herbert de Lozenga, advancing to the centre of the hall, "let discord end between the Norman and Saxon race ; let hostile blood unite to heal the wounds which long have drained this war-divided land. Lady," he added, advancing and taking Matilda by the hand, "this is a bond would prove a pledge of unity more strong than Saxon force or Norman steel could break—a bond of peace and love. Read I aright that blush ?"

Matilda turned from the impassioned gaze of her lover, who looked as if life and death hung upon her reply, to read her brother's will, whose consent alone could ratify her union.

The generous Mirvan knew too well his sister's heart not to interpret its unspoken wishes. First embracing Ulrick, he led him to the prelate, saying as he did so—

"Father, thy wisdom interprets our unspoken wishes ; complete thy holy purpose."

"Thus, then," resumed the prelate ; "I do betroth ye. May Heaven bless the union of two hearts formed by their virtues for each other."

Devoutly did the countess and the venerable Edda join in the benediction upon the last descendant of their ancient race ; and every voice within the hall, *save one*, joined in the shout, "Hail to the Lord of Stanfield ! Hail to his promised bride !" * * * *

On the evening of the important day on which the scenes we have endeavoured to describe took place, William had retired to his chamber in the castle, for he had become the guest of the unsuspecting earl, and was arraying himself for the approaching banquet.

Robert of Artois, who had long been in his confidence, was standing near a table, covered with open caskets full of jewel-work, and which supported the rude mirror in which the prince was complacently contemplating his person—for, like most plain men, he was excessively vain. His hasty, snatchy manner showed that he was either discontented or ill at ease—his companion could not tell which, but waited patiently for the enigma he had undoubtedly been summoned to hear.

"Normans !" muttered the prince, "Normans ! We are no longer worthy of the name. The hound hath changed places with the deer ! We raise the head we ought to tread on ! Ah, Robert," he added, pretending to see his companion for the first time, "what thinkest thou of this goodly marriage, this coupling of the carrion raven with the generous falcon's blood ? We had better all turn Capuchin, and preach on Christian charity. Our swords are useless now, unless we turn them into hooks to reap with. We shall soon, good Robert, be no longer masters in the land we won."

"Not if your highness wishes to prevent the knot the holy bishop fancies he has tied. Norman hearts and hands may still be found asking no better warrant for the deed than the expression of your royal will. Speak but the word, and it is done."

"Sayest thou ?" said William, turning suddenly round, and fixing a scrutinising glance upon him, as if to read his very soul ; for long habit of dissimulation in himself had taught him to suspect the sincerity of others. The ambitious noble met his gaze, and in an instant they understood each other, so prompt is the intelligence of

guilt. "But how to be accomplished?" demanded the prince, leading him to propose the crime he feared to ask him.

"Remove the bridegroom," coolly answered his companion; "that were the easiest way to solve the riddle."

"No; that were dangerous. Let the clown mate him with some Saxon wench, and hold his lands in peace—at least," he added, "for the present. Lozenga loves him like a son, and I have no wish to play my future sceptre against his pastoral staff. His is a temper not to be trifled with. Wouldst thou believe it, Robert? The proud priest threatened that he would send me to my half-witted brother if I presumed to cross his path again; nay, dared to vaunt his vassal line as equal to my own."

"The ambitious traitor!" exclaimed Robert of Artois; "he must be silenced. Such men are dangerous."

"Let him rest; he is as much beyond our reach as Ulrick is beneath it. The prelate and myself, we understand each other. Whilst I act with what he is pleased to call justice and conciliation, he will not oppose our father's disposition in our favour. Let me but once securely feel the crown upon my brow, fear not but I will reckon with him fully for this day. The dotard dreamt not that, with every threat, he aimed an arrow at my brother's life—curse on the chance which made him born before me!"

"Why not, then, secure the bride?" demanded the ready panderer, who more than suspected the cause of the speaker's humour, well knowing how susceptible he was to the thrall of beauty, and how reckless by what means he gratified his licentious passions.

"Thou hast hit my very thought," said the prince, with a smile of approbation; "but how may this be done?"

"Nothing more easy."

"Explain thyself."

"This very night the noble maidens propose to attend our Lady's shrine, where prayers are nightly offered up for the repose of Earl de Bigod's soul. They are too coy to grace your highness's banquet with their presence. What if some able fowler spread the net, and cage the birds on their return?"

"Where to find such a friend?"

"I'll be that friend," replied Robert. "Your highness knows that I would peril body as well as soul to serve your pleasures. My castle at Filby is but three hours' ride; it hath ere now contained as fair a prize as these sweet piping dames. Besides," he added, "the distance is so short you might yourself visit my stronghold, whenever charity inclined your heart to solace the lone captive."

A smile of mutual understanding followed, and the prince and his unworthy favourite separated; the former to lavish hollow courtesies where he meditated the foulest wrong; the latter to

arrange the treacherous snare in which he hoped to entangle the unguarded steps of trusting innocence.

The banquet, after the fashion of the times, waxed rough and boisterous in the hall of the old castle. Never had the fickle William seemed in a more gracious mood ; twice had he pledged to the union of Ulrick and Matilda in the circling cup, calling on Saxon and Norman hearts to join him in the toast. All were fascinated with his open manner and seeming sincerity ; and all, save one, deceived by them. Herbert de Lozenga had watched his impassioned glances when he beheld Matilda in the hall—the look which followed her retiring footsteps ; and, although he anticipated no attempt at outrage, he determined to have an eye upon him. As the banquet proceeded, his suspicions were still further strengthened by the look of triumph which flashed from his fierce eye whenever the maiden's name became the theme of conversation.

Amongst the minstrels who occupied the gallery opposite the daïs, was Hella, the Saxon—admitted by all who loved the joyous science to be the chief of the all but extinct bardic tribe. Many doubted, indeed, if he were even Christian, so devoted did he appear to the old superstitions and traditions of his race, so intense was his hatred of the conquerors. It had needed all the eloquence of Edda, whom he venerated as one of the last who shared in the blood of Hengist, to induce him to be present at the banquet ; nor was it till after he had been repeatedly called for that he descended into the hall with his magic harp to sing before the assembly. So great was his renown, so intense the expectation of the Normans, few of whom had ever heard his song, that even the voices of the noisiest were hushed ere the gifted strain broke forth—

“What spell can consecrate the sword ?
Not priestly prayer, or kingly word ;
Nor e'en the deeper spell which lies
In woman's wondrous, sunlit eyes ;
No ! nor the minstrel's verse of flame,
A nation's shout, the breath of fame,
Can yet the holy spell afford
To consecrate the warrior's sword.

“But when drawn for broken laws,
In nature's right he sternly draws,
When liberty expiring cries,
And wrongs from hill and valley rise,
The blood by tyrants rudely shed,
A nation's tears for freedom fled,
These, these the holy spell afford
To consecrate the warrior's sword.”

The few Saxons who were present hung their heads in shame ; to them it was like the song of their captivity. The Normans heard the strain in gloomy silence ; it sounded like a reproach upon their tyranny and misrule.

"Thou hast chosen a strange theme for our banquet, friend!" exclaimed the prince; "but though our ears are nice, thy skill must not go unrewarded."

He took from his neck a chain of gold, of no great value, and sent it by his page to the aged bard, who received it with a courtly reverence, although he answered with a mocking tongue—

"The praise of princes is our noblest guerdon. Gentle page, it must not be said that Hella was ungrateful to the bearer of so precious a gift; wear this," he added, taking from his own neck a chain whose value more than doubled the Norman's, and which he hung carelessly round the neck of the youth; "and sometimes think upon the poor bard's gift." So saying, he directed his harp-bearer to take up the instrument, and with a stately step left the hall.

At a signal from the bishop, the Norman minstrels sang the praise of Rolla, and the glories of his race; the nobles listening to the exciting strain, and in their enthusiasm forgot the aged Saxon and his song.

For the third time, with a flushed brow, William arose from his seat to give forth the hollow pledge of amity and peace; when an alarm was heard without, and the seneschal, bleeding and unhelmed, rushed into the midst of the assembly. All started at the sight, and the hand of many a knight was laid upon his sword.

"Speak," demanded the bishop; "what has befallen?"

"To arms, nobles and knights!" exclaimed the faithful officer. "Returning from the cathedral, the noble ladies, Isabel and Matilda, have been carried off; their escort was too feeble to protect them."

The eyes of Mirvan and Ulrick remained riveted upon the speaker, as if they scarcely comprehended the intelligence, so completely were they stunned by the blow. The prelate's searching glance was fixed upon the prince, who quailed beneath it.

"Doubtless by Saxons," he stammered.

"By Normans, noble prince—by Normans! I knew too well the taste of Norman steel to be deceived, despite their Saxon dress. I'll swear their brands were Norman."

William scowled upon the officer with a look of hate. The sturdy soldier, conscious of his integrity, met his gaze unmoved. While the nobles were busy in consultation, Herbert de Lozenga drew the commander of his troops, George of Erpingham, aside, and whispered something in his ear. Whatever was the nature of the communication, it evidently surprised the stalwart knight, for, for the first time in his life, he hesitated to obey. The rapid conversation which followed removed, however, his objections; for, touching his sword, in sign of fidelity, he withdrew. The bishop, instead of following his example, concealed himself behind the floating arras, with which the walls of the banquet-hall were hung. At the same moment Hella, the bard, entered the assembly, and approaching Ulrick with a stately step, exclaimed—

"Thy sword ! thy sword ! The wolf is in thy fold ! The vulture bears the trembling dove to its dark nest ! Last of a race I love ! why standest thou idly here ?—to horse ! Let manly deeds answer unmanly outrage ! Strike for thy country's wrongs, thy outraged love, or see thy bride become the Norman's scorn !"

All the nobles present, Saxons as well as Normans, deeply felt the outrage, and rushed into the chamber, calling to arms as they did so ; the alarm bell sent forth its deep, loud note, and added to the horror of the scene. The treacherous prince, the contriver of the cruel scheme, paced the rush-strewn floor, triumphant in his villainy, and, as he thought, alone. His meditations were soon interrupted by Robert of Artois, who, having succeeded in his expedition, had thrown off his disguise, and returned to the castle, lest his absence should be remarked ; leaving his followers, long accustomed to such deeds of violence, to conduct the prisoners to his stronghold of Filby.

"Thou art a bold falconer," whispered the prince ; "thou hast struck quarry fairly. Hadst thou silenced yon prating seneschal, all had been unsuspected. Despite your followers' disguise, he swears they are Normans."

"Let him swear ; oaths cannot harm us, prince. I must away to join in the pursuit, lest I should be suspected. In the morning take your departure as if for London. Once beyond the city, dismiss your train, and turn your horse's head to Filby, where thou wilt find the sweetest bird that ever pined within its iron cage. Thou knowest the way to tame her."

With these words the ready panderer bowed and withdrew. William was about to follow his example when the prelate, quitting his concealment, boldly confronted him. The tyrant saw in an instant that he was discovered. For a few moments they stood gazing on each other—the countenance of the prince pale with fear and confusion, that of the bishop full of contempt.

"So," exclaimed the latter, "this is the way thy royal word is kept ! Thou hast broken thine oath, outraged the roof which shelters thee, risked plunging the land in civil war, to gratify thy passions. What prevents that I proclaim thy treason, and yield thee to the Saxons ?"

"Thine own ambition, priest," doggedly answered William.

"My ambition !"

"Once a king, thou knowest this hand can raise thee to a height but second to my own—the primate's envied throne."

"Vain man !" replied Herbert, "the hermit's cell would please me better than the mitred stall. Power is worthless when the heart is ashes. I came not to implore, but to command thee. Resign thy victims, and I may consent once more to spare thee the brand of public scorn—to shield thee from the avenging swords of those whose honour thou wouldst stain. Decide !"

"Never!" exclaimed the prince, foaming with rage. "I love the fair Matilda, and rather would forego the Crown itself than yield her beauties to thy favoured minion. Thou hast heard my answer."

"But mine is yet unspoken," as proudly replied the bishop. "For thy brave father's sake I would have spared thee; but now the will of Heaven and justice must be done."

He advanced towards the doors which opened from the banquet hall, as if to quit the apartment or to summon aid.

The baffled tyrant, perceiving his design, threw himself between, and drawing his sword, held it levelled at the prelate's breast, to impede his departure. For a moment they stood like the stag and hound at bay, gazing on each other in silence—the churchman calm and stern, the prince trembling with passion and excitement. "You pass not on your life!" he cried.

"Advance one step," said Herbert, drawing up his person to its stately height, "lay but a finger on my sacred robe, and I will bind thee in a spell shall paralyse thy soul! Not to thy honour or thy sense of justice do I now appeal. Thou lost to every tie of honour and humanity, thy terrors are my safety. The brand of Europe and the Church's curse thou darest not meet. Fool!—coward—villain!" he added, as the sword of William gradually inclined towards the ground. "I scorn, deride thy vain attempt. Back, ruffian, back—I pass thee or I perish!"

With his eye sternly fixed upon the prince, the prelate moved towards the door. Thrice the weapon was raised, but its point was as often turned aside when the glance of Herbert de Lozenga encountered his. With frantic rage, he dashed it to the ground, muttering as he did so—

"'Tis true; I dare not take thy life."

William had already determined in his own mind the line of conduct to pursue. Once freed from his accuser's presence, he would mount his horse and ride to Filby. There he doubted not but he might defy the outraged lovers and their friends; for what Norman chief would march against him when once the royal banner was displayed? Herbert knew too well the risk to Matilda's honour to leave him even for a moment alone. Advancing to the door, he merely waved his hand, when George of Erpingham and a body of about sixty men, all completely armed, and wearing their visors down, entered the banquet hall. William trembled at the sight, and involuntarily looked around to find his sword.

"Wouldst murder me?" he cried, glaring on the prelate.

The bishop deigned not to reply, but addressing himself to George of Erpingham, who awaited his orders, said—

"Danger and treason are abroad. His highness goes to my poor palace; escort him thither with all due honour; let none approach him, or exchange a single word. I rely on thy fidelity and knightly faith in this."

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